WILDERNESS
YOUTH PROJECT

2015

Annual Report

Nature Connection

WILDERNESS YOUTH PROJECT

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Dear Friends,

"Santa Barbara might be the epicenter of the movement to bring nature connection into education."

That's what we heard renowned author and educator David Sobel say after visiting twice in 2015. His visits helped us share the good news of nature connection with over 300 parents, community members and educators.

Last year was a high water mark for WYP: we connected more children and families to nature than ever, we expanded our network of allies, and we were more visible in the community, allowing us to get the message out about how nature can make all of us smarter, healthier and happier.

At Wilderness Youth Project, nature connection is our bottom line. Stories and pictures are the best way to measure that bottom line and share it with you. It is your support that makes this work possible: you share your children with us, you contribute time and dollars, and you make nature a priority in your own lives. We thank you.

Gratefully,

DAN FONTAINE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Spending time in nature makes children smarter, healthier and happier.

MISSION

The mission of Wilderness Youth Project is to foster confidence, health, and a life-long love of learning for young people and families through active outdoor experiences and mentoring.

VISION

Wilderness Youth Project envisions teaching the next generation of children to be peaceful, respectful and confident stewards of our world.

2015

Key Accomplishments

2015 marked a year of high points for Wilderness Youth Project and for the movement to connect children with nature.

A few of our "best evers" include:

- a continued excellent safety record
- expanded partnerships with local area schools
- a new van to help us connect more kids with nature
- a strong board and a new Endowment Fund
- staff retention, development and excellence
- the highest level of media exposure (print, on-line and TV) we've ever had

The Statistics behind the Stories

52 weeks of summer camp (averages 5 camps for 10 weeks)

30 weekday programs (school year)

674 unduplicated youth served

53% of participants receiving scholarship

8% of participants have a disability

8 vans

4:1 ratio participants to counselors

46 employees and interns: 10 full time and 36 part-time/seasonal

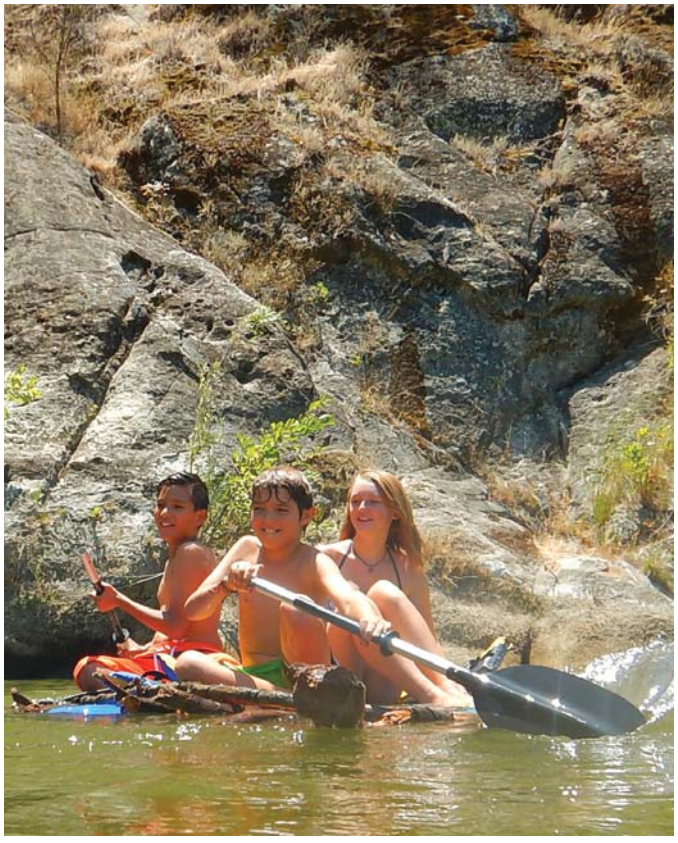
10 Bilingual staff (English-Spanish)

75 program volunteers

10 board volunteers

Strategic Plan

Our work toward the "nature connection bottom line" is organized into a Strategic Plan with **five values that each have specific and measurable goals.** In 2015 we advanced our mission and vision in each of these.



1

Wilderness Youth Project is recognized as an asset in children's lives at every K-12 campus on the south coast of Santa Barbara County.

In order to reach more kids, in 2015 we collaborated with Antioch University of Santa Barbara to bring "In Bloom: Promising Practices in Early Childhood Nature Based Education" to town. We hosted a community lecture in the spring (with 160 attendees!) and an all day workshop in the fall for teachers, which was so well received that we will be offering the training again in 2016. This approach allows us to expand our reach exponentially: providing educators with the skills to bring nature connection to school means more impact than we can provide directly through programming.

Holly Gill, a science consultant and parent at the school where we ran our pilot school day program, shared this reflection:

"The students were given the freedom to explore, play and interact intimately with the natural world in a way most had never experienced or thought possible. It was so fun to hear the stories each week from the students and see them proudly display their dirty clothes and grubby faces. Many expressed that this was the highlight of their year. Students expressed a greater reverence and love for the natural world, they gained confidence in their own abilities to overcome challenges and grew much closer as a class."

Testimonials

"I was very pleased with the leadership of the WYP mentors. They were exceptionally good and responsible with a group of kids that ranged widely in ages & abilities. Thanks again for heading up such a super program for children and nature."
-JOAN LENTZ, AUTHOR OF "THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SANTA BARBARA"

"I believe that WYP has instilled self-confidence and a love of life. He respects and admires the leaders and has developed a deep appreciation for nature. After one backpacking trip he said he doesn't need a tent anymore, because he likes to sleep under the stars. Wilderness Youth Project summer camps are life changing."
-MOTHER OF A WYP TEEN

"WYP provides what kids need desperately today … appreciation and commitment to the wilderness, an opportunity to prove what wonderful things your body can do (if you only give it a chance), marvelous experiences outside the confines of structures and, most importantly experiences that are created by the child and without a screen!"
-VALERIE OLSON, GRANDPARENT OF A PARTICIPANT

2

It is widely accepted that nature makes kids smarter, healthier & happier.

2015 marks the high water mark, so far, for public awareness of the value of nature connection. Tom Ashbrook hosted Scott Sampson, author of *How to Raise a Wild Child: the Art and Science of falling in Love with Nature*, on NPR's On Point. His intro sounded like a clarion call for the work of WYP:

"Sometimes big changes sneak up on us. Many adults today spent hours and hours playing outdoors as kids—in the countryside or suburb or city park—we were out in nature or at least outdoors. Suddenly, in the 21st century, there's been a mass migration of children indoors. Their contact with the natural world, by one study, now amounts to less than 7 minutes a day. Researchers and educators say we need to put our children back outdoors—that their health, mental and physical, depends on it."

Initiatives have arisen nationally and globally to prioritize more time in nature. WYP aspires to see Santa Barbara lead the movement to connect children with nature.

3

Wilderness Youth Project reflects the demographics of the south coast at all levels of the organization.

We believe that all children benefit from nature. We strive to make the benefits of Wilderness Youth Project available for a constituency that reflects the demographics of our community, including socioeconomic status, ability, ethnicity and culture.

We continue to "move the needle" towards this goal. This story underscores the value of breaking down the barriers to nature:

"Laura's balance and coordination are not great and she receives adaptive P.E. services at school. Physical challenges that most kids can do easily are hard for her. Now, she doesn't shy away from rock hopping and tree climbing. She isn't always successful the first try, but she has fun and will always try another time. WYP has given her the confidence to get out there and try. The leaders have supported and encouraged her for 4 years now and we see the results on a regular basis. We went to Mammoth for summer vacation, and Laura finished a 7 mile hike. It was hard and she was tired, but she dug down deep and she made it. I give all the credit for that to WYP."

-MOM TO A WYP PARTICIPANT

4

Wilderness Youth Project has a stable and growing base of funding.

WYP has the infrastructure to support our growing capacity needs.

2015 was our year to grow at our core.

Celebrating 15 years of service, WYP has seasoned leadership and a solid plan, but we found ourselves stretching to make our internal organizational capacity keep pace with external growth. Our internal systems, including our participant database, assessment and registration systems, were not robust enough to efficiently support the new volume of activity.

"My kids went to 9 different programs all over town, and WYP was by FAR their favorite. As a single working parent of two boys, keeping them busy is not easy, tiring them out nearly unheard of. But you guys did it every day for two straight weeks! And to top it off, when I asked them about camp they didn't give me the usual "fine", "fun" or other one word answer. They were absolute chatter boxes and couldn't wait to tell me about it all. Music to my heart!

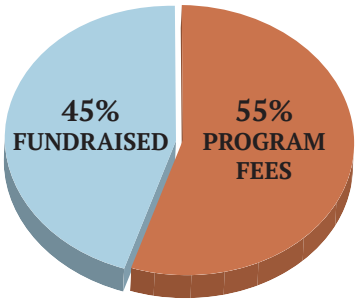
I also want to express my deepest appreciation for the scholarship assistance. Life has thrown us a few loops and I never would have imagined our family to be in need of financial aid. Without the aid we absolutely could not have afforded it. The experience meant so much to all of us."

-MOM OF TWO SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

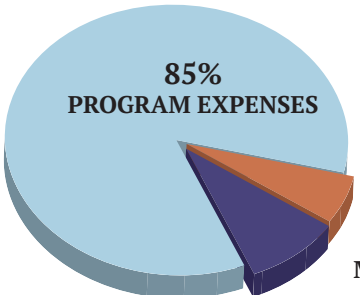
We strive to reflect the demographics of our community and welcome youth with a range of abilities and backgrounds.

In 2015, we were successful in growing at our core, including hiring our first ever Office Manager, implementing Salesforce CRM software for fundraising and program registration, hiring an expert evaluation consultant to create and monitor our Logic Model, and creating our first Endowment Fund.

Total Income: $958,435



Total Expenses: $857,377



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Wilderness Youth Project is a collaborator in leading the national nature mentoring and nature connection movement.

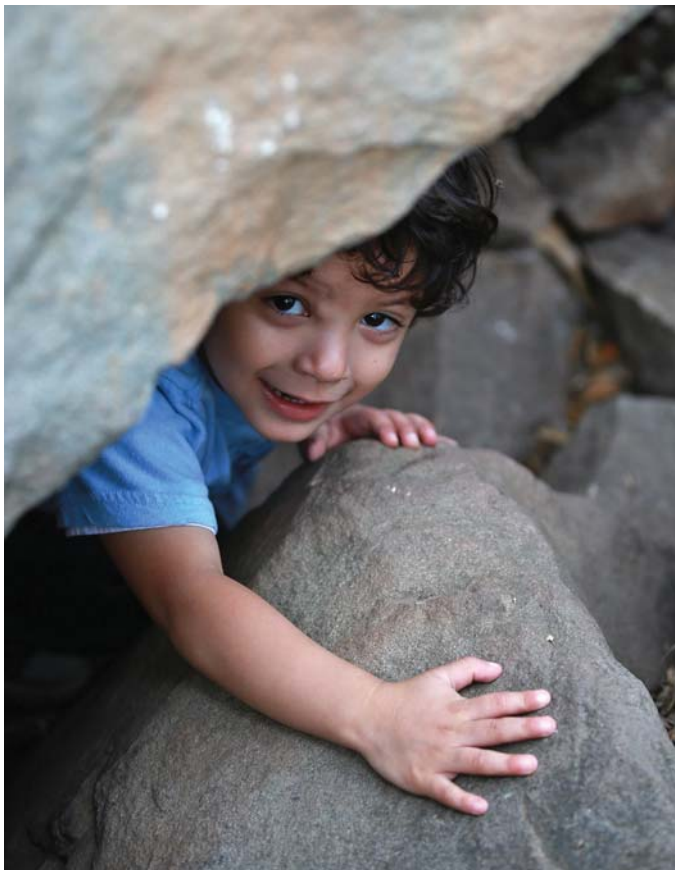
"The research has been done and it is true that it's good for the human mind to be able to live and experience in really natural situations."

Those are the words of E.O. Wilson, the famed Harvard biologist and conservationist, in his October 2015 essay in the Washington Post. That may well be the most confident summary the world has heard from science, after years of a growing focus in the research community on the benefits of connection with nature.

It's one thing to say that the research is valid — or even that we evolved to have an affinity for nature — and quite another to explain why people actually derive health and psychological benefits from being in these environments. Wilson's answer to the question about why nature relaxes, rejuvenates and restores people is simple yet sweeping:

"Instinctively, without understanding what's happening, they know that in certain wild environments, they have come home."

His words mirror the innate wisdom of one young WYP participant, who said ***"All over is our home!"***



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